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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANTO DOMINGO 000414

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SUBJECT: DOMINICAN ELECTION #17: MEJIA'S PRD PRIMARY - A
VICTORY FORETOLD

REF: SANTO DOMINGO 355 (NOTAL)

11. (SBU) This is number 17 in our series on the Dominican presidential election:

MEJIA'S PRD PRIMARY - A VICTORY FORETOLD

President Mejia, running virtually unopposed in the ruling PRD's presidential primary January 18, won about 95 percent of the vote, with his sole opponent Frank J. Thomen -- a political unknown who ran to provide an appearance of competition -- picking up the remainder. The Central Election Board (JCE), at the PRD's request, provided 32 official observers to circulate at the PRD-organized polls, located in non-government premises. Former president and PRD leader Salvador Jorge Blanco termed the primary "a total success" and claimed that as many as half of the party's nearly 1.8 million registered members had participated. Published partial returns showed nearly 574,000 votes tallied and a projected total of 733,000 votes, far more than in the PRD primary in 1999 or in the December rump primary that was declared illegal by the JCE. President Mejia pronounced himself "satisfied" with the results.

Dissident PRD leaders, including Vice President Milagros Ortiz-Bosch, Tourism Secretary Rafael Subervi, Enmanuel Esquea, and PRD president Hatuey De Camps, refused to participate in the primary, alleging that the process was illegitimate and tainted by fraud -- "a farce," De Camps called it. They charged that, by going ahead with the primary, Mejia had deepened factional divisions in the PRD.

Government-owned "Listin Diario" ran big headlines about a "massive" turnout, and the PRD ran two-page newspaper ads with photos showing lengthy queues at various polling sites around the country. Pro-PRD daily "Caribe" provided low-key coverage of a "timid" turnout in a "calm" atmosphere, and populist "El Dia" reported a "lack of enthusiasm" at many voting centers and a lower turnout in Santo Domingo than elsewhere. Long lines at some polling sites in the northern Cibao Valley were attributed by "El Dia" to disproportionate voting by public employees, and "Listin" reported exceptionally high turnout in the Southwest, where Mejia's PPH faction of the PRD was said to be strongest. Mejia's campaign director Agriculture Secretary Eligio Jaquez acknowledged on television that voters had taken longer than usual to show up at the polls the morning of election day. One coercive incident was reported, the theft of a ballot box containing 100-200 ballots.

In the capital, turnout appeared moderate. One of Mejia's palace advisers told us he had to wait in line 45 minutes to vote and observed between 60 and 120 voters at each of 5 or 6 sites he visited around mid-day. Poloff's casual observation of one polling place revealed 6-12 voters at any one time, plus 4-5 poll workers and several poll watchers; a truck-trailer prominently parked nearby bore a sign -- "Presidency of the Republic: Plan of Social Action."

The results left Mejia as the virtual, although not yet formally nominated, PRD candidate; a convention of delegates is expected to complete this process January 25 or later. With no other primaries scheduled, the Central Election Board (JCE) on January 20 announced the formal beginning of the election campaign and invited political parties to register their candidates between now and March 16. The chief candidates lost no time in ramping up for the campaign. Mejia's staff announced a whirlwind agenda for the President to tour the country between now and election day inaugurating public works -- roads, schools, dams, aqueducts -- which in time-honored tradition have been timed to boost his candidacy against his number one adversary in the May 16 election, former president Leonel Fernandez (PLD).

Fernandez's party claimed to have contacted 5 million voters (of 5.1 million registered nationwide) in a door-to-door

verification of voter lists on the PRD's primary day, providing a distraction for news media and drawing criticism from an irritated President Mejia. Fernandez and two senior advisers flew to Washington January 19 to meet with the IMF, World Bank, and IDB (and thus appear presidential). Leonel should be back in country by the end of the week for announced campaign activities in advance of a "nationwide march" of PLD supporters January 26.

The PRSC announced that its candidate, third-ranked Eduardo Estrella, would accelerate his campaign to publicize proposals to deal with economic problems and thus attract enough votes to place second in the election and go on to a possible runoff.

All this left the four dissident PRD candidates marginalized, but not yet out. Their petition to the Supreme Court, alleging unconstitutionality of the voting law (reftel), has so far generated no action by the court. Their possible alternative may lie in the stalled proposal to amend the election law and allow up to five candidates from each party to run in the general election (reftel). Congress postponed debate on the controversial measure until at least next week, but Mejia has given the go-ahead to his legislators to attempt to negotiate passage. One of the most influential dissident PRD candidates, Subervi, told the press January 20 that he also backs the legal change. According to our contacts, the balance among the legislators is too close to call.

The President further called on "all the internal political forces of the PRD" to "mount on the horse" of his candidacy. Ironically, what began as a maneuver by the PRD dissidents to circumvent Mejia's primary and defeat his reelection bid could become a tool for him to bring them back into the fold, play to their ambitions to run for president, and keep their PRD constituents from deserting to Leonel Fernandez on May 16.

Another wild card in the pre-election game will be a national strike being advertised for January 28-29 to protest social and economic problems and the government's policies. It is being organized by the "Coordinator of Popular Organizations," one of the entities involved in a similar action last November that degenerated into sporadic violence. A small leftist party participating in the event has posted notices with President Mejia's photo and the blunt message, "Why wait any longer? He should quit now!" The tactics of the President and the police in handling that challenge will have a resonance during the campaign.

12. (U) Drafted by Bainbridge Cowell.
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